

Reinventing Troy

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Classical scholars come to blows

Earlier this year, at a two-day conference in Tübingen, two classical scholars literally came to blows over the question whether Bronze Age Troy was a city, a centre of commerce or a minor settlement. Not only that: the press and the general public displayed an unusual level of interest in this controversy. The scholarly arguments, not to mention the insults and blows, were not discreetly contained within the walls of a university building: they were broadcast live on national German radio, and discussed at length in major newspapers from several countries, including the *Times*.

What was going on? Why were classical scholars so violent in their disagreement? Why was the German public so interested in the problem? Why was the event discussed in the international press? These questions are not easy to answer: at first glance, the disagreement seems to have concerned nothing more than the size of the settlements outside the walls of the citadel. Normally, a topic of this kind inspires a measured amount of scholarly interest and discussion, not physical fights between scholars and media coverage in several countries.

In order to shed light on the issue, it is necessary to take into account the wider historical, political and cultural context in which the Tübingen conference took place. If we do so, some factors that determined its violence, as well as its international resonance, become immediately obvious.

Schliemann and the discovery of Troy

In the first place, we must bear in mind that Troy has long been of interest to the general public. In 1871, Heinrich Schliemann claimed to have discovered the mythical ancient city of Troy. His announcement was greeted with enthusiasm on the part of the general public and a certain scepticism on the part of professional scholars. Schliemann was not a professional classicist – in fact, he had made his money as a merchant. Nevertheless, he conceived the dream of re-discovering the ancient places mentioned in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and above all Troy.

Schliemann's method was simple but effective. Following the lead of ancient sources and fellow travellers in the region, he dug into the hill of Hisarlik in modern Turkey and found what indeed looked like the remains of an ancient citadel. This alone would have caused enough of a stir, but Schliemann was luckier still. In the third year of his excavations, on the point of abandoning the project, he discovered a substantial collection of gold artefacts which he called 'the treasure of Priam'. Schliemann concluded that the place he had unearthed was indeed the fabulously rich city of Priam and solemnly baptised the hill of Hisarlik with the names of 'Ilium' and 'Troy'.

Schliemann quickly became an icon of the German middle classes. His combination of romanticism and down-to-earth pragmatism seemed to embody the aspirations of merchants, bankers and solicitors. Schliemann himself crucially contributed to his own myth by depicting his excavations as a heroic struggle against all odds. From his legendary cold baths in the morning to the romantic bond with his wife who accompanied him on his digs, his writings have all the hallmarks of an adventure novel.

Classicists, however, remained sceptical. They regarded Schliemann's lack of scholarly credentials with suspicion and

were alarmed by the success he had with the general public. Classics had only recently emerged as a scholarly discipline with a well-defined methodology and a strong professional ethos. Schliemann was self-employed, unorthodox and enthusiastic to the point of bias. His tendency towards exaggeration further alienated scholars. Although Schliemann effectively invented the discipline of classical archaeology, most classicists came to regard him as an example of how not to be a scholar.

In search of Wilusa: the new excavations

In 1988, more than a hundred years after Schliemann, an archaeological team under the direction of Manfred Korfmann resumed excavations at the hill of Hisarlik. Korfmann too excites the public and disturbs the scholars, although in his case it is much harder to see why. At first sight, his aims seem quite prosaic. Unlike Schliemann, he is not treasure-hunting. He is not even claiming to excavate Homer's Troy. Rather, Korfmann and his team hope to recover a centre of trade at the intersection between Anatolia and Europe. Even the name of the city has changed: we are no longer searching for 'Troy' but for 'Wilusa', a place that appears in Hittite documents and sounds promisingly similar to Homer's (W)Ilios.

The new excavations at Hisarlik involve scholars from a wide range of subjects and many different countries. The scale is impressive. The average cost, since 1991, has been more than £300,000 per year. Such an enterprise can only be sustained if it has a wide appeal. It must tell a story that interests and pleases the general public, whose taxes pay for the project – and, ultimately, the additional sponsors of the excavation, such as the car manufacturers Daimler-Chrysler. Korfmann's claim that the city at Hisarlik was an important ancient centre of commerce 'between the cultures' – a very popular claim with his sponsors and the general public – rests on the hypothesis of the existence of a densely populated lower city outside the walls of the citadel. Korfmann and his team claim to have shown that there were important permanent settlements outside the central fortifications; his critics contest his claims.

Korfmann's Wilusa, globalisation and the end of the cold war. If we ask why so many people felt so strongly about Bronze Age Wilusa, we must first of all look at the obvious parallels between Schliemann and Korfmann. Like Schliemann before him, Korfmann is hugely popular in Germany. And like his famous forerunner, he is offering to the German public an image of Troy that satisfies their needs and aspirations. At first sight Korfmann's Wilusa may seem to have little in common with Schliemann's romantic dream of Troy. Schliemann embodied an ideal of heroic entrepreneurship which was popular in the Victorian era. The citadel he unearthed was a place to conquer and colonize: full of gold (the 'treasure of Priam') and full of memories of a glorious past. In comparison, Korfmann's excavations appear sober and his finds prosaic. An international team of experts painstakingly unearthing an ancient trading town does not exactly sound like the stuff that dreams are made of. Yet it too corresponds to contemporary concerns.

Korfmann's vision of Bronze Age Wilusa as a commercial centre and a city between East and West corresponds to a phenomenon that has been steadily gaining ground in the Western world since the end of the cold war. For the sake of argument, let us call it 'globalisation'. Broadly speaking, the thinking behind globalisation can be analysed into an economic

and a cultural component. On the one hand, it entails an emphasis on markets as opposed to states, on economic factors as opposed to political convictions. On the other hand, globalisation entails the meeting of different cultures. Trade and multiculturalism as the two most important ingredients of globalisation also happen to be the two most prominent aspects of Korfmann's Wilusa. We can now begin to see why this commercial centre between the continents can become, for a contemporary public, a symbol as important and powerful as Schliemann's Troy was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The need to respond to the pressures of globalisation is felt throughout the Western world, but it is particularly pressing in Germany, where the end of the cold war coincided with the foundation of a new state. The main challenges facing the new Germany are, precisely, of an economic and a cultural nature. On the one hand, the communist economy of the former Eastern German Republic had to be radically restructured in order to become competitive. On the other hand, the many Turkish immigrants who have helped to sustain the Western German economy during the cold war needed to be integrated into German society. After years of debate, the German government under Chancellor Schröder has finally tackled the problem of the permanently resident non-citizens by allowing residents of Turkish origin to apply for German citizenship. Within this context of economic and cultural reform, the discovery of Wilusa takes on enormous symbolic significance.

The scholarly response

We can now return to the Tübingen conference and the question why classical scholars came to blows over Bronze Age Troy. The real issue was not the question whether Bronze Age Troy had a lower city or not. Nor was the disagreement purely about scholarly method. Rather, scholars were fighting over the role of classical scholarship in the context of globalisation. Korfmann's Wilusa is on the verge of becoming an icon of the new Germany, just as Schliemann's Troy was a symbol for the German Empire. Yet, its significance reaches far beyond the confines of national politics. Indeed, Wilusa encapsulates some of the toughest challenges that classicists throughout the world are facing in the present political climate. Is it legitimate to pander to an audience by selling one's scholarly product, as Korfmann does so successfully? If yes, where does public interest, or public pleasure, end and distortion begin? Should one rely on corporate money, if that means allowing big business to determine our view of world history (Wilusa as a 'centre of commerce')? To what extent is it legitimate to assist governments in their political agenda by producing the desired scholarly results (Wilusa as a melting pot of cultures, just like the new Germany)? None of these questions are to be taken lightly. Together, they go some way toward explaining the extraordinary tensions that characterised the Tübingen conference.

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You can find out about Schliemann, and about the current debate between the two German scholars at:

http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/information/biography/pqrst/schliemann_heinrich.html

<http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/troia/deu/pressereview.html> [and use the 'translate' function]